3: Bouton M-4 (no date) 1640 ST13 Callinago ST13
(ca. 1630)

Concerning the Savages Called Caribs

[From: Relation de l'establissement des Francois depuis l'an 1635 en l'isle de Martinique...]

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1640

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Human Relations Area Files

1958

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Concerning the Savages Called Caribs

1. Religion

66 It is not possible to state the true number of the Caribs on Martinique, because they are continually and actively visiting and passing among those of Dominica and the other islands. Sometimes there are many Caribs here and sometimes fewer. It is true that fear and distrust of the French has caused many of them to leave this island, although we are not at war with them (unlike the French of Guadeloupe). No religion is recognized among them. Like the
775 Canadian Indians they have some recognition of the immortality of the soul, because for a few days they give to the souls of the dead clothes, food, and small belongings for their use. I believe that they do not trouble themselves with knowing what becomes of these souls; at least we have never been able to draw this information out of them. Possibly we should learn more if we were to live among them or they among us. At the present time they are greatly separated from us by inaccessible hills, so that we see them rarely and only when they come by sea to trade with the French.

776 They know by experience, at their cost, that there are spirits, and also the devil whom they call maboya, who sometimes beats them to death. The devil is not strong among them while they are with the French, but when they return they are cruelly tormented as punishment by the devil because of their visit. They also admit that the
[189] sign of the cross is able to ward off the maboya. Most of them have an opening in their houses through which they say he enters and leaves. They do not render him any honor that I know, nor offer him sacrifice. They also recognize a god which they call chemin who does not treat them any better than the maboya does. It is necessary that someone
[191] among them have a special communication with this spirit because he predicts future events which they can only learn through him. For example, they day before we arrived an old Carib woman told a Frenchman that a great French ship would arrive the next day. What she said was true.

777 They say that there is a serpent in Dominica which has the power
825 of making itself large or small and that it has a ruby or gem of the same luster in the middle of its forehead. It takes this gem off when

778 it wants to drink and puts it back afterwards. No one may go or dares
825 to go and see it in its cavern unless he has fasted for three days and abstains from his wife. Otherwise he should not be able to see it, or he would be in danger of being bewitched by it, that is to say, killed.

2. Clothing

291 The Caribs go entirely naked without shame, the women as well
301 as the men. I have scolded a captain for this but he only answered:
[302] "That no good for France, good for Carib." They use urucu [rocou; body paint] to redden their bodies which would otherwise be the color of olives. The women sometimes have a kind of legging which extend from the knee to ankle and which they consider to be fashionable. Men and women wear, when they have them, necklaces of glass beads or crystal, or small, well-matched bones.

There is a man whom we called the Pilot who among them is considered to be one of their foremost captains and is an old friend and loya to the French. When this man came to visit the governor he
[292] wore a hat on his head as a sign that he was beloved and esteemed by the French. The others were as bare-headed as they were naked.
302 They bound their hair, which was not too long, behind their head, and passed through it feathers of the aras [macaw], flamingo, and other birds. These feathers hung from behind, and they also fastened in the same place some trinkets in their manner. They had plucked their beards. Arlet, a brother of the Pilot, and himself a captain,
[301] had some small pieces of brass hanging from his lip, chin, and nose.

3. Occupations

562 Women are unhappy and are treated as slaves, for it is required of them to work in the gardens, tend the family duties, and do everything except go to war, fish, or hunt. If there should be large trees to fell the husband will sometimes take the trouble to do it. They
[675] have many wives, whom they take and leave as they wish. They treat them very badly and sometimes kill them, having as a people no justice and no superior authority. Each one does as he wishes and
674 562 is acquitted of the most horrible crimes if he says that he was "drunk

as a fly," which is to say very drunk. It is thus understood that he has been well judged. They very often kill the old people saying that they are no longer well and consequently are unhappy. When their wives are old they kill them, arguing as their reason that they are no longer able to tend to the garden or make cassava or ottiçou [kind of beer]. They are jealous, and if a woman has failed them they kill her or make her a servant and slave to others. When they have suspicions about her misconduct they make her drunk—for their ottiçou is potent when it is well made—and when she is in this state she can conceal nothing.

The men are extremely slothful and pass the time lying or sitting on their hammocks, carousing, gossiping, and allowing themselves to be combed by their wives. They cannot pass an hour without being combed and don't even take the trouble to fish or hunt, preferring to fast a little and eat only some cassava and crabs, rather than leave the house to catch lizards or tortoises, or some other thing. However, when they come to trade with the French they catch a tortoise and bring it with them. This is their principal item of trade. They sometimes bring pineapples and bananas as well as bows and arrows which they give to their compères; this is the term they use for all their friends.

The Caribs have a ridiculous ceremony at the birth of their children. The woman gets up immediately after having given birth and goes back to work if she is able. The husband goes to bed /in a hammock/ which they hang high from the house, and here he complains about his belly and rubs it as if he were suffering greatly. For the span of an entire moon he leaves his hammock only for necessities, supporting himself with a stick. The others visit him as they would a sick man. It is true that to a certain extent they cause this pretended illness to pass into a real one because the man is badly treated. He must fast very rigorously for a few days, and they give him only cassava and very little of that, but they give him enough to drink, especially at the moment the child suckles. After several days he is able to eat crabs, and some time after this he is permitted tortoise meat; finally he eats any kind of food without limitation, as though he were completely healed. But before this they hold an assembly where the so-called sick man is gashed all over his body and loses much blood. Those fathers who have already had five or six children are only gashed on the arms and legs. They do not know what it is to swaddle children, nor do they treat them delicately as we do; but nevertheless they love them tenderly.

624 They have almost the same ceremony when they make a captain of a man, although captains do not have too much authority among them. They make him fast, gash him, and then throw at his head the skins of cuttlefish. If he does not parry them dexterously he is in danger of being wounded, in which case he would not be considered a good captain.

843 202 During the pregnancy of the wife the husband does not eat tortoise for if he did eat it, they say, they child would be deaf as a tortoise. In the same way the father doesn't eat manatee because that animal has very small eyes and the child would not fail to inherit this imperfection. But when they eat with the French they are not so scrupulous about these restrictions.

4. Commerce

157 648 The life which they lead is so agreeable that they are very contented, and no matter how well we treat them, we cannot keep them living among us. Some Caribs have lived among the French for a long time and have had an easy life, but at the first occasion they have broken away and returned to the other Caribs. They are extremely suspicious, and if they see you with a musket in your hand they will never visit your house. The least thing makes them mistrustful. As we were passing on our return by way of Dominica a Carib came towards us half way from the shore. As soon as he saw the small boat which was behind our vessel he turned quickly away. If one has weapons in his boat they will never come aboard. If one of them climbs aboard a ship, the other always stays in the canoe as a lookout. They judge others as they judge themselves, which means they trust no one. If they come in sight of a house they carefully look all around, partly to see if there is anything to frighten them, and partly to discover a means of surprising it.

648 When they entered the brick house which the governor had made they roughly threw themselves against the wall to test the possibility of pushing it over. They found it firm, and hiding their astonishment and anger they remarked, as though it pleased them, "That's pretty good, compere." No matter how good they have been with you they will endeavor to trap you, and once they have you at their advantage

you cannot expect any mercy from them. When their treachery towards you misses the mark they will say in cold blood "Me no angry at you." Then they will deal with you as if nothing had happened, and as though they were your best friends.

5. Eating and Drinking

They are extremely filthy in their eating. If you could see them make their ollicou you would hold it in horror. Once, in the presence of our governor at dinner, one of them was sitting at a distance from a plate of food which appealed to his appetite. Climbing on the bench he put his foot between the dishes and extended his full length over the table. One foot was on the table where he had been eating and one arm supported his weight at the other end, and he reached for what he wanted. This is how these gentlemen behave! As for the remainder they are so proud that no matter who visits them they do not get up, but only point to a hammock and say "lie here." They very freely ask for everything which appeals to them, and are offended when you refuse. This is the reason why people who know the Caribs leave only those possessions in their houses which they are willing to give them when the Caribs are expected. The Caribs promise a great deal but they very often are unfaithful. They eat animals which do them harm such as chiggers, ticks, and similar vermin.

6. Warfare

The Caribs have small drinking parties in their carbets [men's houses] on various occasions (that is to say, assemblies in their great houses which are built especially for this purpose). Here they drink excessively and eat only a little. These gatherings last sometimes as long as eight to ten days. This would be the best time to attack them, for they are almost always drunk. After a ceremony of this kind they begin to deal with their affairs, especially warfare. The very oldest captains harangue them and are listened to with a marvelous silence. The decisions are followed by common consent, although no one has any authority as commander. The business of war commences ordinarily with great harangues or speeches and complaints by the old

721 women who retell everything that has been committed by those against whom they are going to wage war. They talk about harm done by the enemy to their ancestors, even reporting what they consider insults. To quarrel with a Carib is the same as to strike him, and to strike him is the same as to murder him. When you offend one Carib you offend the whole nation. But it doesn't work the other way around; for if you do good deeds for one of them the community does not feel itself benefited.

After these harangues the children dance, jump, and weep, demanding that these insults be revenged. All the young men become very excited and testify to their desire and courage. Finally the old men order war.

726 Besides waging war against the French in Guadeloupe and against the English in St. Lucia, Antigua, Montserrat, and other islands occupied against the will of the Caribs, they in addition make war against the Galibis who are savages of the continent and have an alliance with the Arawaks who also live on the continent. They have no difficulty taking these enemies by surprise, for they expose themselves in their canoes and pirogues to a sea journey of at least 200 leagues. They go from island to island and predict with sufficient certainty the bad weather and storms by studying the sky and stars, about which they have an excellent knowledge.

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411 Their weapons are bows of redwood and arrows made of a certain
726 reed, the end of which, instead of being tipped with iron, consists
727 of a very sharply pointed wood which is poisoned. They set fire to leaf-covered houses by attaching burning cotton to the end of their arrows. They do not always aim straight at their enemies but aim high and they are so skillful in this that most of their shots take effect. They can also shoot behind themselves when running away, and when they are hotly pursued at sea they stretch out full-length in their canoes in order to protect themselves, and shoot continuously without ceasing, even bending their bows with their feet. They also have spears of redwood, hard and heavy, which they hurl very well. For close fighting they use clubs which are big pieces of redwood, flat, a good inch thick, and almost half a foot wide at the end, with a length of three feet. They crush the head of their enemy as easily as we might do with a crowbar.

726 All their wars are waged by surprise early in the morning just before dawn and are accompanied by horrible screaming. To look more

26 hideous they paint themselves around their eyes with black from the junipa /Genipa?/ apple. /When fighting the French/ they move continuously to avoid the effect of firearms, and if they see the lighted match of one of our muskets they easily avoid the discharge. They throw themselves on the ground or run here and there, moving at an incredible speed so that it is very difficult to pick a target among them. They very much fear guns; when they do not see the fire set, they say that it is the maboya, that is to say the devil, who puts in the fire.

They ordinarily fight in three groups, an advance guard, a rear guard, and the main body. When they are halted they are immediately thrown into disorder and confusion. We have a fairly easy time of it if at the beginning we show them that we have no fear, and if we are fortunate enough to knock down one, two, or three of them, for in this case they promptly retreat. They do not retreat, however, 27 without making every possible effort to retrieve the bodies of their dead companions, because they greatly fear and hold it to be a terrible dishonor to leave them among their enemies. But if we flee (or retreat in order to fight them with this strategem) or show any fear, or fire many shots without effect, then they become extremely courageous and fight furiously and do not retreat unless, they are put to the last extremity. There are already some few among them who have firearms and know how to shoot with them, and this is a very great evil. God forgive those who have given them to the Caribs!

Their defensive weapons, as I have said, are flight, lightness, and perpetual movement. They lie in their canoes in order to be sheltered from shots, for they have neither shield, nor any other thing to protect them, and are as naked in battle as they are on all other occasions.

101 Besides canoes which are made of a single piece of wood, and are not made of bark like those of the Canadian Indians, they have piroguses fashioned from two or three pieces of wood. They are much larger than canoes and carry forty to fifty men, and they put sails on them, in imitation of us, when they can get them.

27 They kill and eat their captives with a thousand ceremonies and cruelties, however not so extreme as those of the Canadians. They sometimes preserve a hand of the dead enemy which they carry in triumph and dance all about with it. They never forget nor pardon any injury which has been done them, or which they think has been done them.

done them. They swim like fish. In war it does not matter if their canoe capsizes for they know how to right it very easily and get inside it again. They always carry their hammocks with them.

7. Lore and Learning

The Caribs do not count higher than ten, and they demonstrate it by their fingers. Sometimes they count to twenty, or twice ten, showing both fingers and toes. To express a greater number they pick up some sand and throw it, and they say, "as many as flies," or "very many," or "as much as this." They count months by moons and count days by nights, for they say, "I will be there for so many nights," or "I will return after so many nights." They also express with their hands and arms how they consider and measure the goodness of nations. They point to their entire hand and a part of their arm and say to us that France is as good as this. For the Flemish or Dutch they show the hand and say "as good as this." The English are the worst in their estimation, and they only indicate them by showing the tips of their fingers. It is possible that when they speak of the French in their absence, or before men of other nations, they do not maintain the same division. They use little tobacco and like to mock the Europeans who come so far to these islands seeking this miserable weed.

They have their own particular language, which I believe is very hard to learn. Besides this they have a jargon mixed with French, Spanish, English, and Flemish. The trade they have had with those nations has caused the Caribs to learn some of the words of these languages, so that in a short time one is able to understand and be understood by them. This will be a great advantage for their instruction.